

INTERPRETING IGBO MASKING AND FOLKLORIC TRADITIONS THROUGH TEXTILE ARTWORKS OF UCHE OKEKE, IFEDIORAMMA DIKE, GODSON DIOGU, AND KENECHUKWU UDEAJA

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Abstract

Uche Okeke, Ifedioranma Dike, Godson Diogu, and Kenechukwu Udeaja are socially committed Nigerian artists who have found in local masking and folkloric traditions appropriate ideas, media and themes to document private and public histories of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. One factor that unites these artists is their association with the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria Nsukka, here referred to as “Nsukka Art School” or “Nsukka School.” Their works, whether in the form of tapestry, a more organic wall hanging, dress, or sculptural form, are imbued with a sense of dynamism, culturalism, and performance akin to the life and traditions of the Igbo. Unfortunately, these textile works appear largely unknown to several art critics and researchers around the world. Relying on relevant literature and photographic images of some selected works of the artists, this paper explores how these artists’ works document important aspects of Igbo history and tradition. Based on the analyses, the paper argues that the artists have graphically demonstrated social responsibility.

Keywords: folklore, masking, *Uli*, Igbo, fibre, cloth

Introduction

Artists have a well-defined social responsibility. Boas (1947 p. 270) in writing about the artist’s social responsibility did not fail to state that medium or form is not the matter. The focus is the artist’s productive existence in the land of the living. Therefore, artist relevance lies in speaking or telling the social truth . . . “whether one does anything about it or not” (Boas, 1947, p. 276). Artists “tell” such truth through their artworks. As George Boas pointed out, such an artist is bound to be sensitive to the "currents of changes" of a given society at a given time (p. 275). For instance, the Italian Renaissance fresco painters told stories of some cherished past through their works. Whether or not a work of art features emotion-laden subjects, the socially responsible artist’s interest is in creating an impactful awareness among the public as the artists selected for discussion in this paper have demonstrated.

Uche Okeke, Ifedioranma Dike, Godson Diogu, and Kenechukwu Udeaja are among the few other socially committed artists in Nigeria, particularly the Southeastern region, who have found in local masking and folkloric traditions appropriate ideas, media, and themes to document some important private and public histories. They have worked as cultural enthusiasts and have produced significant artworks inspired by Igbo folklore and masking tradition. Some derived their inspiration from *Uli*, a means of decorating human skin and walls in the traditional Igbo society.

Uche Okeke, one of the artists to be discussed here, and others after him, for instance, tried to re-invent *Uli* and folklore traditions in the formal art space at Nsukka. The idea to do so must have been anchored on that several local traditions have declined in the wake of colonial rule and during and after the Nigeria-Biafran war. Ifedioranma Dike was Godson Onyebuchi Diogu's contemporary. They shared a similar history as regards academic art training. Both have been written and exhibited widely and have attracted some scholarly attention. Kenechukwu Udeja is a much younger artist and a former student of Diogu. There seems to be no scholarly attention given to Udeja following his recent appearance in the local art scene. Udeja who distinguished himself as a fashion artist has also made a similar statement in his Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) exhibition, and that statement is that fashion could be utilized beyond mere clothing to capture unique histories.

Examining the characters of textile artworks by these artists would reveal five broad conceptual attributes – ethnocentric, technological, impressionistic, metaphorical, colourful, and sculptural. All these characters are subsumed in culturalism, which is the love for indigenous arts, customs, and habits. Folkloric and masking practices are characteristic of traditional African society. They served and still serve as a means of preserving and transmitting indigenous values, practices, and knowledge. That these traditions are fading explains why a lot of creative individuals are venturing into the business of reinventing them through performance and visual display. One factor that unites the artists under study is their association with the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria Nsukka, here referred to as “Nsukka Art School” or “Nsukka School.” The school is known for the adaptation of indigenous creative idioms such as *Uli*, masking, and folkloric traditions into modern painting and other genres of art.

Igbo Masking Tradition

Scholars have written extensively on Igbo masquerades and masking tradition, directly and indirectly (Boston 1960; Ray and Shaw 1987; Okafor 1994; Reed & Hufbauer 2005; Diogu 2010; Onu & Fadila 2019; Udeja 2019; Asogwa & Odoh 2021). Several of them talk about physical features and the very essence of masquerades, the matter of ownership, female representation or characterization, and performance. Among the Igbo, the masquerade is regarded as a spirit of the dead in bodily form, hence, the collocation, *nmuo -onwu* [lit. spirit of the dead], used to identify masquerades. This is why a masquerade is regarded as a “spirit manifest” possessing a spiritual vision. It “ritualize[s], anchor[s] and project[s] the cultural identity of ... [the] people” (Asogwa & Odoh 2021, 4). Here masking tradition or masquerade is conceptualized in the material sense, that is, the embodied spirits in special costumes. The monumentality of some masquerades such as *Ijele* and the elegance of costumes seen, especially on female characters, are the key factors of interest to artists who turn to them for inspiration.

Reed and Hufbauer (2005), and Afikpo Onu & Fadila (2019) provide useful insights into female representation in Igbo masking tradition. Okafor (1994) notes that women's role in the tradition in an Igbo community, *Nwagbogho* or maiden masquerade is found in many parts. She dons female dresses and accessories. Sophistication defines the appearance of female

masquerades. This quality is to a large extent true of the *Ijele* mask, the Igbo most spectacular and elegant-looking masquerade (Diogu 2010, 45). Its heroic proportions and design follow Igbo aesthetic idiom and design conceptualization.

Krydz Ikwuemesi's comment on the Igbo masquerade as reported by Obodo (2019, 111) is important at this juncture:

...when you look at *mmanwu*[that Igbo masquerade] itself, [you will notice that] it involves different aspects of art – music, dance, graphic art, sculpture, and other art forms. So, it is a kind of composite theatre where all the arts combine for the enjoyment of the public.

The implication of the above statement lies in its interpretation of the Igbo masquerade as a sort of mixed media art. Little wonder. The artists are interested in the Igbo masking tradition. Ikwuemesi initiated the cultural project aimed at reinventing masking which “culminated in three-day events, beginning from 27 to 29 March 2009” (Obodo 2019, 110). Diogu (2010, 516) argues African masking tradition promotes local fibre art.

Igbo Folkloric Tradition

Folklore has been an important scholarly engagement (Bascom 1964; Ferris 1973; Azuonye 1987; Njoku 2012; Akuma-Kalu 2009; Onuora-Oguno & Alvan-Ikoku 2014; Onwuekwe and Muoneme 2017; Alo 2019 and Asika 2020). The moral and cultural implications of folktales in traditional Igbo society are topical. To Ferris (1973), “folklore acts as verbal shorthand in communication” strategies of great African writers like Chinua Achebe (25). Achebe indeed “makes skilful use of Igbo folklore.”

The revitalization of Igbo folklore seems to be the greatest challenge facing the Igbo in the postcolonial context. The need to reverse the trend appears pressing following the eroding Western influence on indigenous culture, especially in this era of globalization. This is why several visual artists engaged folklore artistically. Onwuekwe (2012) tried to illustrate Igbo folklore using computer graphics software, Adobe Photoshop CS4. Some public sculptural works in a Nigerian town with such dominant philosophical concepts as *monism*, *duality*, *trinity*, and *quadrality* (313). Nzoiwu, Alu & Oyeoku (2018) observe that Igbo folklore is scarcely represented in public sculpture. Since 2000, an Igbo scholar in the diaspora has been “using lessons from Igbo folklore to shape the preparedness of Igbo immigrants to establish their ethnic community tradition” (Njoku 2012, 328). Nigerian film industry on her part has also produced some Igbo films such as “*Odum na Akwaeke*,” and “*Ogbuagu na Akwaeke*,” which were drawn from a tale of a maiden who rejected several suitors and eventually married a spirit husband (Anyachebelu 2016).

The visual data for this study have been collected from the artists and literature. Images of artworks are subjected to formal and iconographic analysis. This paper explores how these artists' works document important aspects of Igbo history and tradition. Based on the analyses, the paper argues that the artists have graphically demonstrated social responsibility. In the following pages, attention will be given to the conceptual frames, Igbo Masking, and Folkloric traditions, before focusing on how Uche Okeke, Dike Ifedioranma, Godson Diogu, and Kenechukwu Udejaja have appropriated ideas from these traditions in their textile arts.

Uche Okeke

Uche Okeke was born in 1933 in Anambra State of Nigeria. His Igbo group has rich folkloric and masking traditions which shaped his artistic orientation from childhood. Growing up with a father who was a woodworker and furniture maker and a seamstress mother who occasionally engaged in *uli* design, must have modelled his interest in arts. After primary and secondary school education, Okeke received formal art training at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology Zaria, later called Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He was a foundation member of the Zaria Art Society made up of a group of art students from the institution's art department. Formed in 1958 the society promoted indigenous ideals in art learning and practice and strived towards the establishment of a distinct modern art. Okeke embraced and popularized the ideology of "Natural Synthesis" among the group. This is the philosophy of blending the best of the West with the best of the locals in the art profession.

In line with Natural Synthesis ideology, Okeke focused on folklore and other cultural practices. One commentator said: "One of the difficult tasks he [Uche Okeke] has undertaken is to recreate Ibo folklore in drawings" (Oloidi 2019, 4). His collection of drawings in the maiden publication of a local art club called Mbari was largely folkloric (Ezeh 2019, 29). Okeke himself acknowledged:

I have tried to depict the haziness and traditional tales, which often confuse man and beast and mix up real life with the dream world and I have attempted to capture the spirit of the dim and distant past of which Ibo folk tales are representative... Chukueggu (2010, 263).

In the foregoing excerpt "traditional tales" and "folk tales" share the same meaning. Okeke simply expressed his fascination with an aspect of the distant cultural past of his people. Thus his works "reflect upon the macrocosmic manifestation of Igbo cosmology as noted in folk songs, great legend, and poetry" (David-West1996, 72).

Uche Okeke started to explore some of the local traditions as far back as the 1940s (Oloidi 2016, 4). That was before He joined the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria Nsukka in December 1970 where he radically altered the Western academic pedagogy instituted by the pioneer expatriate art teachers to reflect his artistic ideology of natural synthesis (Oloidi 2019, 14). The change was more noticeable when he became the Dean of the Faculty of Arts as he was in a position to administratively influence the existing academic programme and to "creatively lay the foundation for Nsukka School" (Oloidi 2019, 17). His period in the school, particularly from 1971 to 1985 was the heyday of the "*Uli* Period". During this time, the emphasis was on the teaching and exploration of indigenous ideas, materials, and forms (Odita 2019, 27).

Okeke made the exploratory artistic approach of Nsukka School so appealing that people from other areas of speciality outside the fine arts had to borrow a leaf. Exploration thus assumed a unique meaning among Nsukka artists in varied areas of speciality, making art

practice in the school robust and boundaries of art genres blurred. Art students from the school usually further the cultural experimentation they were exposed to in the school after their graduation. Several lecturers with such experience who relocated to other climes have continued the artistic tradition in their own way. *Uli* masters like Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu double as experts in folklore (David-West 1996).

Commentaries on Uche Okeke's art are usually about his paintings and drawings (Ikwuemesi 2010) and not his textile art as they are relatively few (Diogu 2010, Dike 2011 and Odita 2019) Okeke was said to have gone to Germany for his postgraduate Diploma in Art where he met two textile specialists who were engaged in tapestry works that were forceful, expressive and impressive (Diogu 2010, 79). Okeke returned to Nigeria and accepted a commission by the Federal Government of Nigeria to produce a large tapestry in 1977 for the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Lagos. The tapestry was produced in a broad vertical loom.



Plate 1. Uche Okeke, *Onwuelo Depart*. Tapestry, 1977. 210cm length by 150cm width, Source: Diogu (2010).

The tapestry *Onwuelo Depart* (Plate 1) was technically produced by students from the textile section of Nsukka School under Okeke's direction (Diogu 2010, 80). Formalistically, a cross-section of imagery of a hen is seen at the top left side of the work. Only the head and neck of the hen named *Onwuelo* are portrayed. Complementing this is a figure resembling a highly stylized head of a supposed mystical hen seen more at the centre of the work. This mystical hen, a representation of ancestral spirit, assumes the posture of one making the farewell order, "depart".

Conceptually, *Onwuelo Depart* is drawn from *Tales of the Land of the Dead: Igbo Folk Tales* by Uche Okeke published in 1971. The book has forty Igbo tales with themes of hypocrisy

and the weaknesses of man. *Onwuelo Depart* is a love experience between a love-sick *Onwuelo* from the land of the living and a very beautiful-looking spirit in female form (Dike 2012, 3). *Onwuelo*'s infatuation did not allow him to see that his supposed soul mate was a spirit. He therefore followed her to the land of the spirit where he never returned alive. The same story inspired Dike's work captioned *Onwuelo Naba* discussed later in this paper. The unusually big eye of the mystical bird has a connection with his second tapestry captioned *Anya-Nwammuo*.



Plate 2. Uche Okeke, “*Anya Nwammuo*” (Spirit eyes), Tapestry 1977.1.26m long X 1.8m wide.

Anya-Nwammuo—the Spirit Eye, Plate 2 is a tapestry. The miniature version of the work was featured in an art exhibition at the Goethe Institute, *Lagos* in 1983 (Diogu 2010, 80). Pictorial elements of the tapestry are rendered using three media, cotton, rayon, and jute, and three main colours, blue, red, and brown, and consisting of irregular geometric shapes.

Conceptually, *Anya Nwammuo* eulogizes the all-seeing ability of a spirit that is far superior to humans. Spirit is one of the key characters in African folktales (Asika 2020, 8). The Spirit Eye is comparable to the moon. Folkloric tradition once thrived at night, particularly during moonlight. The eyes of a masquerade are taken as spirit eyes. In an interview, John Nwamba, a carrier of certain masking “medicine,” revealed thus: “...I am different when I am in it. I understand people differently because when I look at them, my eyes will be spirit's eyes, not like people's eyes” (Keith Ray and Rosalind Shaw 1987; 659).

Ifedioranma Dike

Ifedioramma Ndubueze Dike (1947-2017). He was from Awka, in *Anambra* State. He was trained as an artist between 1973 and 1978 at the Nsukka School of the University of Nigeria. His area of specialization is textile. He earned an MFA and Ph.D. degrees from the same university. Dike's approach to visual expression is largely through the exploration of ideas from masking tradition, and his cultural heritage. He revels in deploying Igbo themes and symbols in his works. He was a pioneer member of the “*Aka Group*” of exhibiting artists which lasted between 1986 and 2005.

Structurally, most of his works are composed of fibre, fabric, wood, and metal. Few are rendered solely as batik work. His three works featured here exemplify these media.

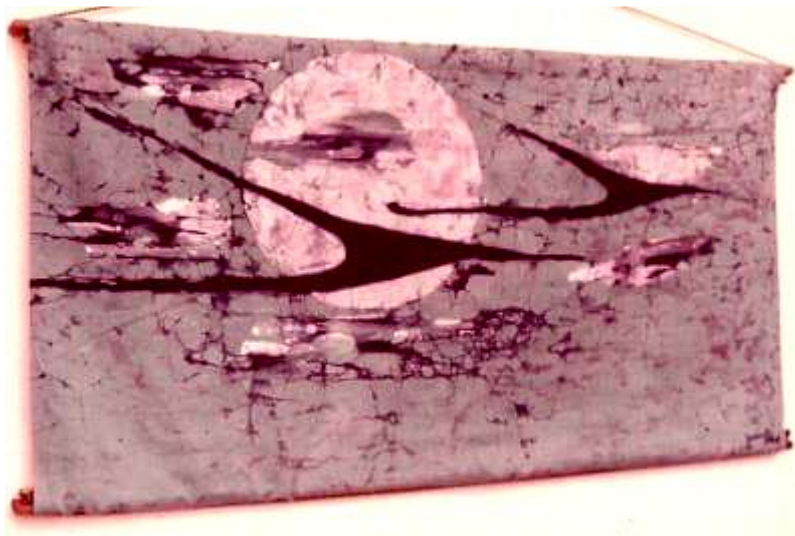


Plate 3. Ifedioramma Dike, *Onwuelo Naba*.1977.
batik on cotton. 1977 Source: The artist

Dike's batik work captioned, *Onwuelo Naba*, Plate 3, was produced in 1977, the same year Uche Okeke created *Onwuelo Depart*. Both titles literarily mean the same thing; the former serves as the vernacular translation of the latter. They are based on the same storyline drawn from the popular Igbo fable, *Onwuelo Naba*. Formalistically, *the work* is imbued with Igbo *uli* symbolism popularized in the Nsukka School as an ethnocentric creative idiom. It features stylized birds in flight against a sky background dominated by a big white circle, a representation of a moon.

Conceptually, the work has a folkloric theme. *Onwuelo* is a human being who ignorantly falls in love with a mythical spirit. The show of motion signifies the force of Onwuelo's infatuation. In the story, the mystical spirit is portrayed as a kind spirit who did want the *Onwuelo* her human friend to die. Onwuelo appears bent on following the spirit girl to her home. She would not want that as she knew the danger of such an adventure. There is a lyrical melody sung by the spirit girl to dissuade Onwelo from following her to the world of the spirits in the deeps, perhaps, in the Atlantic Ocean.

Dike's second work, *Our Faces are Different*, has the character of an Igbo masquerade. Dike reportedly said in an interview:

I am conversant with the masking traditions of my people and have resolved to bring innovation into this tradition, through the adaptation of some of the traditional, formal, and conceptual qualities, to make new artistic statements in textile art..., Great artists through the ages have always sought for new directions in art and also the younger generation

artists have often looked upon the great masters for inspiration and creative direction (Diogu 2010, 101)

The media in our *Faces Are Different* are jute raffia and fabric. His technique is appliqué.



Plate 4. Ifedioranma Dike. *Our Faces are Different*. 2003. Mixed Media.

Here he used three primary colours, in addition to green and black. He created four symbolic faces partly defined with furs and placed them against the backdrop of what appears as different coloured textile pieces that evoke the imagery of national flags. Dike stitched pieces of fabrics together onto larger rectangular fabric panels seen in *Our Faces are Different*, Plate 4. The specific narrative behind the work appears unclear and this leaves viewers with the chance to craft their interpretation of the work. Fourth, the number of faces and colours used in the work may represent the Igbo local week which consists of four days. These are market days called *Eke, Ori, Afo, and Nkwo*. Again, among the Igbo four is a symbol of completeness. Analyzing Adada masquerades' formal qualities, Asogwa and Odoh (2021, 20) provide meanings of red, yellow, black, green, and white. Red suggests danger or death. Yellow signifies joy and announces the presence of supernatural forces. Black suggests Mother Earth, a symbol of love and care, and on the contrary, wickedness. Whiteness connotes "purity and divinity" while ideas of "vegetal life and newness" are embodied in green.



Plate 5. Ifedioramma Dike. *The Lost Scrolls (Lamentations)* (1989), 142cm x 63cm Acrylic yarn, cotton twine, plastic, wood, appliqué. Source: Dike (2012, 9)

The third work by Dike captioned in Plate 5 is *The Last Scrolls*. It consists of two jute panels, each having one prominent *Uli* symbol, colours, and other extraneous elements. Attached to a tree branch like a nest, the hanging scrolls reveal five major local colours – red, blue, yellow black, and green. Each scroll traps two batons in the form of a shuttle used in handloom at different positions.

Conceptually, *The Lost Scroll* is a lamentation of the speedy erosion and loss of Igbo traditional values in their entirety, as evident in the fast disappearance of *Uli* as symbols and motifs for body decoration and murals (Dike 2012, 4). The decline of the Igbo masking tradition forms part of the reason for the lamentation. To the artist, the loss is regrettable and deserves to be documented in scrolls.

Godson Diogu

Godson Diogu (1951-2015) was a professional teacher, textile artist, and art historian at the Nsukka art school. He spent most of his career life at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He worked as an academic staff from 1992 to 2015 when he died in active service. His doctorate research which was completed in 2010 focuses on what he called “Vegetable culture...in the Nsukka School, 1975 -2005”. By “vegetable culture”, he was referring to the tradition of using fibre as a textile art medium. Diogu has demonstrated his deep interest in fibre art and technology since the 1990s. His works, particularly those produced when he joined Nsukka School as a lecturer, are more expressive than his earlier works. Describing his rather radical approach, Anatsui (2004) noted that Diogu’s textile works were indeed aggressive and demanding as “objects of contemplation.”

This mode of representation has helped him to manage the limitations associated with the two-dimensionality of textile design, its craft status that tends to disadvantage textile artists. Thus most of his works are akin to those in the Fine Arts genre, often more highly rated.

Although Diogu produced some fabric designs, specially dyed/printed materials, his two installation pieces, *In Memory of Dick Tiger* and *Igwe and Lolo*, are essentially three-dimensional. The first appears as a relief and the other as a sculpture in the round. Both works evoke the imagery of Igbo masking tradition in particular. In the works, Diogu deployed a top section of a plastic container and positioned it in such a way as to simulate a human head and face. Some parts of the containers appear to have been subjected to heat to create the impression of eyes and nose. A small textile piece, apparently woven from a handloom is used to delineate the perimeter of the 'head.' The entire symbolic portrait appears fixed.



Plate 6. Godson Diogu. *In Memory of Dick Tiger*, mixed media. 2002, Source: The Artist

Conceptually, *In Memory of Dick Tiger*, Plate 6, reminds viewers of the life and times of Dick Tiger, a personage in boxing history as well as in the Igbo fight for freedom during the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967-1971. Tiger was born in 1929. He hailed from southeastern Nigeria. A winner of the World Middleweight and World Light Heavyweight Championships, the professional boxer once lived in Liverpool and the United States where he practised his boxing career (Makinde 2005). He fought on the Biafran side during the civil war that ended in 1970. He died in 1971. He was recognized in the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1991 and rated in 2002 as the greatest fighters of the last 80 years. Coincidentally Diogu produced this work in 2002 in his loving memory. The work has told the historical truth (Boas, 1947, p. 276).



Plate 7: Godson Diogu. *Igwe and Lolo*, 2002. fabric, buttons, foam, metal, and plastic bottles. Inset is a more complete view of the pair, *Igwe and Lolo*
Source: The Artist

Igwe is the Igbo name for king and *lolo* is the name of his wife, the queen. The elaborate dual installations (Plate 7) depict a couple. They are composed of layers of conical forms in eight segments, each having wrapped pieces lined up vertically. Countless pieces of wrapped tube-like forms surround each segment, of the eight segments, two appear very large and identical. The remaining six beneath the larger ones are relatively small and each; they are practically defined by one plain colour. The circular base which serves as a tableau of figures seen on certain masquerades appears as a shoulder in Diogu's *Igwe and Lolo*. It sustains the head form. The structure of *Igwe and lolo* is such that virtually part of the 'body' is wrapped, except the face, devised from the topmost part of an enclosed plastic container. The parts of

the part of containers, the cover outlet or opening, and the sideways of the handle were repurposed to serve as mouth and eyes.

Conceptually, the works allude to the modern Igbo concept of kingship. Kings and their wives are distinguished by their costumes of royalty, consisting of elaborate dress that gives the king an outlook of *Ijele*, the monumental masquerade of the Igbo. This is to highlight his bravery, purity, wealth, and power, accentuating the king's position as a divine being.

Kenechukwu Udejaja

Kenechukwu Udejaja was born in 1991. He had his art training at the Nsukka School and joined as a staff in 2016. He completed his Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) programme in the school in 2019. His MFA project focuses on Igbo masking elements as a creative resource for contemporary carnival costumes. With such techniques as the appliqué method, glueing, stitching, knotting, and tying, he produced several works bearing the resemblance of three Igbo masquerades, *Agbogho mmuo*, *Ijele*, and *Mgbedikehad* had on him. Here three works with the following captions, *Ugo na Cha Mma*, *Okwulu Okalisia*, and *Ebube Dike* have been selected for discussion.

Ugo na Cha Mma was inspired by *Agboghommuo* masquerades which parody feminine character and elegance. Structurally, the work combines elements of *Agboghommuo* and *Ijele* masquerades in terms of the intricacy of the surface design seen on *Agbogho mmuo* and *Ijele* costumes. *Ugo na Cha Mma* has backpack panels accentuated with metal spiral pleats at the different sides.



Plate 8: Kenechukwu Udejaja. *Ugo na Cha Mma*.
Fabric, metal, thread, and acrylic paint 2019 ©The Artist

Conceptually, *Ugo na Cha Mma* portrays the feminine elegance of Igbo brides. The name *Ugo na Cha Mma* is a metaphor that likens the beauty of the eagle to that of an average Igbo maiden on his wedding day. Such women wear flamboyant hairstyles. Dressing elaborately is a source of mockery especially when the wearer has no good character. Some young women are physically attractive but cause moral panic due to their lifestyle. The work's body-fitting suit and accompanying accessories in red, gold, dark red, cream, and black share a similar colour scheme with his second work, *Okwulu Okalisia*.



Plate 9: Kenechukwu Udejaja. *Okwulu Okalisia*.
(Front and back views). Mixed media.2019, Source: The Artist

The costume seen in plate 9, *Okwulu Okalisia*, is inspired by the *Ijele* masquerade of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria known for its monumentality and magnificence. Structurally, it features about 12 panels of fabric with distinct borders. Each panel has a series of geometric shapes. Over ten such panels could be vaguely seen in the image. Their patterns consist of triangles and rhombuses. These were made of different pieces of fabric which were either dyed or painted.

Conceptually, the ensemble is a metaphor for the positive and negative attributes of tallness. A truly tall man appears monumental. The word conveys here a sense of extraordinariness. Masquerades are known to compete among themselves in a show of power. They often find themselves in the politics of survival of the fittest. This explains why many resort to fortifying themselves with charms during public outings.



Plate 10: Kenechukwu Udejaja. *Ebube Dike (Radiance of a Great Warrior)*. Fabric, metal, thread, and acrylic paint 2019 ©The Artist

The work structure of *Ebube Dike*, (Plate 10), consists of hand-stitched designs placed side by side to form a huge skirt-like costume and appurtenances –pectoral necklace, stringed beads, cowries, and fur of rams. Some of these are seen around his chest and arm. Its rear is decorated with an inverted cone-like backpack, filled with geometric shapes, mirrors, and *Uli* motifs. Udejaja derived inspiration for the headgear from a certain masquerade. This is true of its colour scheme and motifs. The huge skirt consists of panels. The outer pieces of panel-like appliquéd cloth drop down from a disk-like framework; they feature various, colours shapes, and symbols.

Conceptually, the work symbolizes royalty, wealth, charisma, and the charm of vibrant male youth. *Ebube Dike* denotes the glory of a hero. It tries to mirror a typical Igbo warrior in his celebratory dress. His outfit is a dress of power, courage, and bravery. Such qualities are the envy of an average man in the Igbo community. Layers of fabric lined up vertically at the lower part of *Ebube Dike* represent many legs of the millipede and they serve as “a symbol of plenitude, peace and diplomacy” (Asogwa and Odoh 2021, 20). Udejaja’s mannequins are more or less non-black figures. This racial dimension speaks to some form of hybridization in modern Igbo cultural shows. This intrinsically fits into the natural synthesis ideology of Uche Okeke.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Igbo masking and folkloric traditions constitute a major source of inspiration for Uche Okeke, Ifedioranma Dike, Godson Onyebuchi Diogu, and Udejaja Kenekwuwu. The selected works by these artists have been analyzed formally and contextually. The reason for the analysis is to interpret and place the works of these artists in their right historical and cultural contexts. Boas (1947, p. 276) revealed the truth that a work of art has a multiplicity of values and interpretations justifies the attempt to guard against possible misinterpretation that could arise from a uniformed subjective approach to the work.

Discussed works are products of exploratory artistic experiments that essentially demonstrate the cultural ideology of Nsukka Art School. Their iconological analyses reveal the influence of some historical factors such as the Igbo masquerades, and folklore on the artists. The creative approach is diverse and so are the art forms. Some appear as wall hangings, some as wearable textile pieces, and others are three-dimensional works in the round. The point is that the creators of the showcased textile and fibre works examined are cultural enthusiasts whose historical inclination motivated them to document the public histories of the Southeastern people of Nigeria.

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